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Take a helicopter ride to another world

Go back in time to the Grand Canyon – just a 45-minute flight from the lights of Vegas

LAST week, IAN SAVAGE reported from Las Vegas, where upscale hotels and restaurants are helping to transform Sin City's (largely inaccurate) image as a cheap and tacky gambling Mecca. This week he found out that as well as all the attractions of the city, there is plenty going on which will transport you, literally, to a different world...

IMAGINE one of the most awe-inspiring sights on earth — the Grand Canyon, one of the natural wonders of the world.

Two hundred and seventy seven miles long, up to 15 miles wide and a mile deep, with rocks at its depths that are more than 250 million years old.

Now picture that astonishing spectacle seen from the cockpit of a helicopter as you fly straight into it.

I have previously visited all of the Canyon's rims — North, South and West — but never have I experienced anything like the rush of skimming over the edge and then down deep into the chasm.

The flight, with Heli USA, was part of a four-night trip on Virgin Atlantic's inaugural flight earlier this month from Manchester to Las Vegas.

To get to the awesome South Rim of the Canyon, in neighbouring Arizona is a six hour drive. And it's a good two hour journey by car to the West Rim, home

of the infamous (and unfortunately way too commercial) Sky Walk.

But in a helicopter, a trip to the Canyon is just 45 minutes from Vegas's McCarran International Airport.

And what a trip it is! If you have never been in a helicopter it is a strange but exhilarating feeling as you quickly ascend and then hover over the city below.

The brief journey, interspersed with snippets of info from our friendly pilot, took us over the Nevada border and the magnificent Hoover Dam, completed in 1936 (and originally named the Boulder Dam after nearby Boulder City which housed the thousands of workers who toiled on its construction).

The dam was constructed on the Colorado river to provide the area with electricity and its completion led to a new body of water just a short drive from Vegas... Lake Mead, now popular with city dwellers keen to escape

the soaring desert temperatures in the summer.

From there it is just half an hour to reach the Canyon.

And what an incredible feeling as the helicopter whizzed over the edge and into the enormous fissure in the landscape.

Suddenly, I was hovering over the Canyon, with the Colorado river that formed it over hundreds of millions of years thousands of metres below.

The pilot took us deeper to get a closer look at the different colours of the ancient rocks. An amazing sight. A further five minute flight took us to the nearby Grand Canyon Ranch, a working ranch, around 165 square miles in area, which gives a fascinating glimpse into what life was — and still is — like in the old West.

The ranch and the helicopter tour company Heli USA are both owned by Stockport man Nigel Turner, a former military pilot who saw a gap in the market for well organised flying tours to the Grand

Canyon from Las Vegas in the early 1990s.

Nigel, who has been bewitched by the Western USA since he was a boy watching John Wayne films on TV at his home in Offerton, acquired the ranch, which is bigger in area than Manchester, in 2002.

He spent two years of hard work and lots of money renovating the buildings, at the same time carefully ensuring that they retained their historic charm.

The Diamond Bar ranch was established in the middle of the 19th century as part of the Mormon Trail, a 1,300 mile trek from America's Mid West to Salt Lake Valley in Utah, where the Mormons founded Salt Lake City. A notorious gunfighter, Tap Duncan set up home at the ranch after riding with Butch Cassidy's Hole in the Wall Gang.

Nowadays, there are still real live cowboys and cowgirls running the operation.

When we had landed at one of the helicopter pads at the

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ranch, we were taken in a horse drawn wagon, to the main building, where a western-style meal awaited us, along with a brief and gentle horse ride (an optional extra, payable locally) through the classic scenery, populated with Joshua Trees, to be greeted by real cowboy entertainers, who shared their stories and songs — and we also got a glimpse of wild buffalo.

Nigel is passionate about the plight of the buffalo in the USA, which were almost wiped out in a 30 year period between 1865 and 1895, slaughtered mercilessly — not even for food — by the white man, who saw removing the Indian population's main source of meat as part of their strategy to starve them back onto the reservations.

He has introduced wild buffalo (they can weigh up to a tonne each when fully grown and can run at speeds of 35mph for five minutes at a time) to the

ranch and it is evidently one of the achievements he is most proud of.

He said: "Buffalo are magnificent animals. They cannot be domesticated, but they are so much a part of the Western American landscape that it is fantastic to have them on the ranch and give people the chance

to see them in the natural setting."

The ranch has luxurious wooden cabins for hire for overnight stays and is soon to launch an overnight campout where you can saddle up, ride into the sunset with an experienced guide and stay at a rustic cowboy camp and listen to traditional tales around a camp fire.

It's a world away from the bright lights and hustle and bustle of Las Vegas!

Meanwhile, back in

amongst those bright lights, you can just as easily get away from it all, by opting for a day of pampering in the beautiful five star luxury spa and salon in The Wynn and Encore hotels on The Strip.

Hidden away in this luxurious hotel is, if it is possible, an even more opulent oasis of calm.

It looks like no expense has been spared on the décor of the 60,000 sq ft salon in the Encore tower.

There is a comprehensive menu of treatments to

choose from once you are booked into the salon, which also has a pool, spas, a sauna and steam room, as well as the treatment rooms.

I had a "fusion" massage, a mix of techniques from various countries, which left me feeling about as relaxed and ready for a night out as it is possible to be!

There are dozens of shows in the city to choose from every night and one of the newest is at the Aria Resort and Casino in the City Center development.

No trip to Vegas would be complete without mentioning Elvis Presley and the King of Rock n Roll is the focus of this spectacular show performed by Cirque du Soleil.

Viva ELVIS, which fuses dance, incredible acrobatics and live music, is a tribute to the life and music of Elvis.

The show homes in on significant moments in his life against a backdrop of

some of his most popular songs and features an array of incredible stunts, the highlight of which is a "superhero" segment with acrobats diving 40ft onto trampolines in a brilliantly choreographed sequence to music which has to be seen to be believed.

Finally, I got the chance, albeit briefly, to experience a taste of life as a high roller — with a tour around one of the suites at The Wynn and Encore.

At more than 7,000 sq feet, over two floors, and with butler service, a billiard room, and a sitting room with chandelier and bar, along with a panoramic view over the city, this suite will set you back upwards of \$10,000 a night.

Unfortunately, that is unlikely to be where I will be staying on my next visit.

But if you are a newcomer to the city, there is much more to Las Vegas than you might initially think.

Top dining, top hotels, top entertainment — and memories to last a lifetime.

“ Suddenly I was hovering over the Canyon with the Colorado river below — an amazing sight



PASSION Stockport man Nigel Turner, who owns the Grand Canyon Ranch



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MAGNIFICENT The amazing Hoover Dam on the Colorado river



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STUNNING VIEWS A helicopter ride over the Canyon is a must



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GRAND TRADITION A horse ride in the Canyon provides a taste of the old West